

Poetry writing in the post-16 English curriculum

DANIEL XERRI

University of Malta

ABSTRACT: This paper examines the place of poetry writing in the post-16 English curriculum in Malta. In presenting the results of a small-scale study adopting a mixed methods approach, it explores the views of teachers, students and an influential examiner. The paper proposes that while there seems to be an appreciation of what creative writing can contribute to students' engagement with poetry, there is at the same time a fear that students may not be capable of writing poetry because of a perceived lack of skills and talent. It also concludes that teachers may resist the teaching of poetry writing, because of a lack of professional craft knowledge and pedagogical skill in this domain.

KEY WORDS: A-Level English, assessment, creative writing, poetry, post-16 curriculum.

INTRODUCTION

In 1963 the literary critic and literary theorist Northrop Frye famously declared that “Poetry is always the central powerhouse of a literary education” (p. 26), advocating a belief in the centrality of poetry to any student’s engagement with literary culture. Similarly, Tunnicliffe (1984) claimed that nothing “exonerates the English teacher believing in the centrality of poetry from work on poetry writing as part of the normal curriculum” (p. 163). This view was shared by Cox (1991) who argued that besides being asked to write literary essays, students should also be given the opportunity of trying their hand at writing other genres, such as poetry. According to Burkhardt (2006) this is necessary because “Every student is a poet and has ideas she or he wants to communicate in verse” (p. 72). However, Wilson (2009) shows that in a number of countries “The status of poetry writing within the curriculum can be described as secure but mixed” (p. 388). In the United Kingdom, for example, despite the popularity of creative writing courses at tertiary undergraduate and postgraduate levels, it is only from September 2013 that the subject will be on offer at secondary A Level. In the context of contemporary A-Level English classrooms, it is worth considering the extent to which such engagement involves more than the critical reading of poetry for the purpose of essay writing in examinations. This mixed status may partly be a result of teachers’ view of poetry writing in the classroom as a problematic area, especially due to the perceived difficulty of assessing such non-technical writing.

In Malta, where English is the L2 for the vast majority of A-Level students, poetry writing does not even enjoy such a mixed status. Similar to the position of poetry in United States English Language classrooms (cf. Schillinger, Meyer and Vinz, 2010), poetry lessons in Malta do not feature any poetry writing and students are only encouraged to write *about* poetry in the traditional examination essay format. Malta’s National Cultural Policy (PSTEC, 2011) was intended to address such a lacuna. However, creative writing ended up being the preserve of tertiary undergraduate

students and it has yet to be introduced at secondary level. The Maltese National Curriculum Framework (MEE, 2012) indicates that children's ability to engage in "creative expression" (p. 33) is desirable but it makes no reference to poetry writing *per se*. Moreover, pre-service teachers do not receive professional training in the teaching of poetry writing, and hence any classroom initiatives on their part are not adequately supported. This article shows that when these factors are compounded with the beliefs of teachers and curriculum developers in relation to the value of poetry writing, the latter's current exclusion from A-Level English classrooms will not be easily redressed.

PEDAGOGICAL OBSTACLES

One of the main obstacles facing the incorporation of poetry writing in the post-16 curriculum is the suspicion that it is impossible to teach such a set of skills. Benton (1986) found that the "fundamental division over the worth of this aspect of poetry teaching is very strong" (p. 16), with teachers either adopting a Romantic view of why students should be encouraged to write poetry or else scepticism in relation to whether they enjoy doing it or are actually adept at it. Aware of such scepticism, Sloan (2003) affirms that "Certain beliefs have grown up like weeds around the subject of poetry writing" (p. 34). Tompkins (2008) tackles one of these widely held beliefs by saying that, "Perhaps it is true that great poets are born, not made, but every child can write poems and enjoy the experience" (p. 263). While admitting that as an idea it "now seems rather naïve", Hyland (2009) indicates that the teaching of creative writing is underpinned by "the basic assumption that all writers have similar innate intellectual and creative potential and simply require the right conditions to express this" (p. 20). Pugliese (2010) seems to operate on this assumption when he affirms that, "Creativity is a dynamic concept...it is not unique to certain gifted individuals, and it is not genetically learned" (p. 19).

The cultivation of students' creativity is to some extent dependent on teachers' own efforts to engage in creative thinking and teaching: "creative teachers are such, precisely because they have made a conscious effort to be creative – they have, in other words, *decided* to be creative" (Pugliese, 2010, p. 15). The writer and creative writing teacher Lesley Thomson (2013) believes that it is possible to teach creative writing, but just because one is a writer it does not mean one can teach: "while possessing the knowledge of their profession, to teach inexperienced and motivated writers, a writer needs knowledge of effective teaching approaches" (p. 45). This undermines the commonly held belief that only professional poets can teach poetry writing. It also helps reinforce the idea that teachers possess the potential to engage their students in such an activity as part of the English curriculum, if they are provided with the right kind of support by an educational system that overvalues standardised assessment.

CURRICULAR AND ASSESSMENT PRESSURES

In Malta and some other contexts, poetry writing is shunned because teachers and examination boards might not consider it suitable for assessment. Dymoke (2002) finds it disconcerting that "Students' own poetry writing is even perceived as an

inappropriate activity in some contexts” and considers that, “This is a good example of the struggle to find a legitimate place for poetry writing within an assessment driven curriculum” (pp. 85-86). In the US, for example, “If a skill...can’t be tested with multiple-choice items or simple three- and five-paragraph essays, then it won’t be taught” (Petrosky & Reid, 2004, p. 3). Ofsted (2007) highlights the “irony” of the fact that in secondary schools “pupils spend a significant amount of time studying poetry written by others but most of them write no poems of their own” (p. 9). This partly happens because teachers consider poetry writing to be “difficult to teach and assess” and because for most of them “there is too little time in a crowded examination timetable for what they perceive as a luxury” (Ofsted, 2007, p. 9).

Despite “the thirst among school students” to engage in creative writing, Vakil (2008) found that in the curriculum this was being “marginalised” and that “Teachers were being forced by the pressure of syllabi and exams to teach prescribed texts and extracts from texts” (p. 158). Mansoor (2010) shows how in an L2 context the introduction of creative writing faces a number of “stumbling blocks” due to students being “more accustomed to pursuing clearly defined lines of thought as articulated by a teacher or a text book...coupled with the fear of losing grades” (p. 202). Rinkevich (2011) argues that “The current emphasis on standardised testing and accountability has undoubtedly played a part in diminishing teacher and learner creativity” (p. 219). When examination “specifications offer limited opportunities for assessment of students’ written poetry” teachers find “it hard to make time for poetry writing in lessons” (Dymoke, 2012, p. 406). A study by Simmerman et al. (2012) shows how teachers claimed not to have enough time for poetry writing because of “time constraints imposed by other curriculum demands” (p. 299). The marginalisation of poetry writing is mostly due to it being perceived as an add-on activity rather than a crucial part of what English teachers and students should be doing in class.

The sidelining of poetry writing is partly a result of curricular and assessment pressures. However, not many students and teachers seem satisfied with the situation. In a study of student beliefs about poetry teachers, Hennessy and Mannix McNamara (2012) found that “Encouraging and facilitating poetry composition was seen as integral to the role of an effective poetry teacher by many interviewees. A large number of pupils commented critically on the lack of space for poetry writing within their classes” (p. 388). Whilst acknowledging that the status of poetry writing is not firmly established in the curriculum, Wilson (2013) reports that in a target-driven educational culture teachers “enjoy the prospect of entering creative spaces where they are by definition free of outside control while remaining aware that not to do so would be to risk losing ownership of the ‘bedrock’ of their subject” (p. 82). Curricular and assessment pressures might be severely hampering teachers from fully engaging their students in poetry writing, but this is not to say that the blame can be directed solely at those who draft syllabi and examination specifications.

TEACHER TRAINING AND POSITIONING

Teachers’ attitudes towards poetry writing can affect the frequency of such an activity in class and the level of engagement expected of students. A US study by Blythe and Sweet (2005) showed that while expected to teach creative writing, English teachers were not formally trained in how to do so. This lack of training partly accounts for

students' writing remaining at novice level. It also accounts for "feelings of inadequacy" (Simmerman et al., 2012, p. 300) on the part of teachers. This is why Hennessy and Mannix McNamara (2012) note that "Facilitating the development of an empowering teacher agency at pre-service level can, in no small part, encourage teachers to provide the space required for pupils to engage critically and creatively with poetry" (p. 391). In order to cultivate such creative spaces in the classroom, training at both pre-service and in-service levels needs to not only equip teachers with the knowledge and skills needed to teach poetry writing but also to supply them with opportunities to develop their own stance as poets.

The way teachers position themselves in the poetry classroom can have an impact on students' attitude towards poetry writing. For Burkhardt (2006), those "Teachers who share their own poetry with students, both early drafts and polished verses, provide powerful coaching" (p. 73). Teachers who do this kind of thing probably see creative writing as "an educational process that permits deeper engagement with the already written" (Knights & Thurgar-Dawson, 2006, p. 19). When teachers position themselves as teacher-poets they are provided with deep insights into their students' sentiments and lived experiences (Issitt & Issitt, 2010). Moreover, those teachers "who assume the identity of 'writer' and write alongside their students are likely to facilitate writing improvement in their students in terms of motivation and performance" (Locke, Whitehead, Dix, & Cawkwell, 2011, p. 277). Even when poetry writing is not part of the curriculum, teachers who choose to write poetry with students manage to boost their sense of engagement (Xerri, 2011). The need to ensure such outcomes underscores the significance of positioning oneself as more than a teacher of an anthology of poems that students are expected to write essays about in the exam.

However, if teachers fail to reconceptualise their role vis-à-vis poetry, then poetry writing will remain at the periphery of what happens in class. Refraining from writing creatively "is likely to increase teachers' sense of uncertainty and personal discomfort in teaching creative writing in a meaningful way to A-level students" (Green, 2009, p. 188). If poetry writing is perceived as a specialisation that does not fall within the scope of English teachers' interests and duties, then this activity is not going to have a chance of flourishing in class. In the UK, for example, creative writing is most often associated with writers who visit schools to do workshops with students. Such residencies are to a large extent rewarding, despite the fact that benefits are harder to achieve in secondary schools due to curricular and assessment pressures (Owen & Munden, 2010). However, for the National Association of Writers in Education (NAWE), these residencies are truly successful when they act as a form of INSET for teachers and allow them to develop as writers. For NAWE (2010) "It is increasingly clear that creative writing is best nurtured in the classroom by teachers who are willing to engage with writing themselves – indeed who see themselves as practising writers." Ings (2009) agrees with this and highlights "the importance of building teachers' confidence" and of "developing teachers' own practice as writers" (pp. 74-75) through continuing professional development. Teacher training plays a fundamental role in helping to nudge teachers into adopting the stance of teacher-poet. It is by positioning themselves in this way that teachers can be fully convinced of the necessity of engaging students in poetry writing.

BENEFITS OF POETRY WRITING

Those who believe in the centrality of poetry writing in the English curriculum probably value the benefits that can be accrued from such an activity. Prescott (2012), for example, indicates that “creative writing and its teaching strategies have enormous potential to add energy and significance to students’ learning across many fields of study” (p. 156). Unfortunately, most evidence in support of the idea that poetry writing is of benefit to students is not based on solid research. As Wilson (2009) points out, “Claims for poetry’s importance within the curriculum...are largely based on opinion formed from practice rather than empirical studies” (p. 387). However, the significance of such practice-based views should not be easily dismissed as works by Hughes (1967), Rosen (1998), Yates (1999) and others have done much to inspire and support teachers interested in encouraging students to write poetry.

Students’ engagement with poetry writing seems to lead to a number of benefits that have to do with identity and self-expression. Moxley and Stoval (1991), for example, make a case for the teaching of creative writing by emphasising the idea that “Beyond offering a cathartic release, these writing experiences will enable students to understand their own lives” (p. 9). For Lambirth (2007), “Children who are encouraged to write poetry also become involved in a process of self-discovery – it assists children in understanding their experiences of everyday life” (p. 3). Dymoke (2009) believes that “poetry can give students opportunities to express their feelings when they would feel overwhelmed by writing in other forms” (p. 86). Hennessy and Mannix McNamara (2012) report that “Pupils noted poetry writing as important in developing awareness of poetic technique, and also acting as an outlet for cathartic reflection, self-exploration, and self-expression” (p. 388). To some extent these benefits are also part of a substantial amount of literature that views the composition of poetry at school as a therapeutic activity (Hitchcock, 2005; Williams, 2011; Wissman & Wiseman, 2011). Feldman (2011), for example, claims that poetry writing helps high school students “gain insights into themselves and their peers as they collaborate” (pp. 102-103). Poetry writing is seen as an activity that allows young people to discover and verbalise insights about themselves and the world they live in.

Poetry writing is also credited with being able to improve students’ linguistic knowledge and skills. Poetry promotes language acquisition because it “teaches children to listen, develop vocabulary, learn to read and write, and think creatively” (Holmes & Moulton, 2001, p. 3). Moreover, “Added benefits accrue when second language students engage in poetry writing” (Holmes & Moulton, 2001, p. 3), this being especially relevant to students in Malta. Spiro (2004) affirms that “a focus on form and language is exactly what makes poetry different from other written texts” (p. 7). By means of poetry writing activities, teachers “encourage the learner to be creative and to use strategies for applying the familiar to the unfamiliar – just as poets do” (Spiro, 2004, p. 7). Lambirth (2007) explains that, “The writing of poetry, with its emphasis on vocabulary and heightened language use can only help develop the writer’s ability to experiment with the potency of written forms” (p. 3). For Tompkins (2008), “Children benefit from experiences with poems; they develop a sensitivity to language and learn to play with words and evoke fresh images” (p. 263). Basing himself on the results of a small-scale study, Wilson (2009) contends that “poetry writing can be an aid to language development, enabling children to engage with

creative habits of mind and extending their schemas of what writing can achieve” (p. 388). Poetry writing is thus seen as being a fundamental means by which English teachers may enhance their students’ mastery of language skills. For post-16 students the most significant benefit that they derive from poetry writing is probably their ability to read poetry in a critical manner.

THE RECIPROCIITY OF READING AND WRITING

Poetry writing is very much dependent on how much reading students do. However, their ability to read poetry is strengthened if they are provided with the opportunity of adopting a writer’s guise. Elkins (1976) maintains that “Writing poetry teaches students much about the genre itself” (p. 221) while Beach and Marshall (1991) argue that there is “a necessary and organic connection between the reading and writing of poetry that poets understand, students need to experience, and English teachers all too often forget” (p. 392). Cox (1991) sees reading and writing as being “intimately related” (p. 80), while Sloan (2003) points out that the reading of poetry is a prerequisite for an effective poetry writing lesson: “Success stories do begin with *reading* poetry, lots of it, with no strings attached” (p. 33). Such reading helps students develop “sufficient familiarity with poetry to notice things about its construction” (Sloan, 2003, p. 33). Dymoke (2003) explains that “the requirement to read and write about poetry in public examinations is viewed by many teachers as an increasingly heavy burden. By making a stronger link between reading and writing this burden can be lightened” (p. 190). This is in line with the idea that poetry writing “should be encouraged more widely so that students can engage with poetry in a personal way and gain a fuller appreciation of how the poets they are studying draft their work” (Dymoke, 2003, p. 18). It seems clear that students’ knowledge of poetry is increased both by reading a broad selection of poems and by means of poetry writing (Mitchell, 2002; Wainwright, 2004). Encouraging students to write poetry needs to be seen as a beneficial activity for students and not as a distraction from attaining curricular targets.

In fact, it is probably high time that more teachers appreciate the idea that poetry writing helps enhance students’ critical reading skills (Burdan, 2004). Spiro (2004) affirms that, “By understanding better what it feels like to be a writer, students will also be more active and confident in their enjoyment of reading” (p. 10). According to Austen (2005) the inclusion of creative writing in literature courses can help students’ own engagement with literary texts by resulting in the following benefits: “(1) dispelling the awe of literature and creating active learners; (2) developing critical readers; (3) furthering student understanding of literary criticism” (p. 139). Beach, Appleman, Hynds and Wilhelm (2006) concur and point out that poetry writing helps students to position themselves as writers and to notice how poems are constructed. Green (2009) argues that at A Level, “Formalising students’ thought processes about their creative dialogue with texts through the act of writing also enriches the act of reading” (p. 192). In his opinion “By engaging students within the creative processes of textual creation... teachers can encourage them to read like writers and to write like readers” (Green, 2009, p. 193). Eaglestone (2009) explains that “Creative writing is another important way of engaging with literature, another of the new ideas that are reshaping English as a subject, stressing the *heuristic*, learning by doing” (p. 112). By means of such methods as critical rewriting students learn how texts mean and this

shows that “the creativity of writing and the creativity of reading are really...the same thing” (Eaglestone, 2009, p. 113). Poetry writing strengthens students’ ability to read in a critical manner, this being one of the primary aims of most post-16 English curricula.

The interdependence of critical reading and poetry writing is sometimes disregarded and this probably leads to an inability on the part of students to master either of these skills. According to writer and Professor of Creative Writing Fay Weldon (2009), those at the receiving end of post-16 education need to see evidence of further reading on the part of their creative writing students: “Too many come to us with A levels but without any experience of a complete book. Too many still believe they can write books without first having read them” (p. 173). Similarly, Schillinger et al. (2010) highlight the sense of dependency that exists between the reading and writing of poetry. Their views are to some extent shared by Bluett (2010), for whom reading poetry for writing purposes “makes one engage with the poem in a very immediate and vital way” (p. 46). Olsen (2010) posits that, “Through creative attention to the reading and reuse of found materials, students can be offered roles as writers who are conceptually engaged in the continual reflection on and redefinition of what constitutes poetic practice” (p. 155). In P. Wilson’s (2011) opinion, “creative writing can be used to enhance literary response alongside critical thinking and writing” (p. 443). For this reason creative writing teachers “must empower students to think for themselves while learning how to read, write, re-read and re-write creatively” (Disney, 2012, p. 7). Capitalising on the reciprocity of critical reading and poetry writing helps A-Level English students to meet assessment targets while also intensifying their personal engagement with texts.

THE STUDY

With the exception of works by the like of Hanauer (2010), research on poetry writing in L2 contexts remains quite scant (Disney, 2012). This article aims to address this gap in the research literature by exploring the views of different stakeholders in relation to the continued absence of poetry writing from the A-Level English curriculum in Malta. The study was conducted in a post-16 institution and it partly focused on students aged between 16 and 18 enrolled in a two-year, A-Level English course. As part of this course, students study two poetry components, a set text (e.g. Wilfred Owen’s war poems) and the literary criticism of poetry. At the end of their course students sit for a public examination in which they have to write an essay on the set text and an essay on an unseen poem. Preparation for the first component is provided by means of lectures, while training for the unseen poem component is provided during literary criticism seminars.

The mixed methods approach adopted in this study involved a survey completed by 376 students, and semi-structured interviews with 15 students and eight poetry teachers. A member of the A-Level English examination and syllabus panels was also interviewed. The teachers all held Masters degrees or PhDs in English and only one of them had less than five years’ teaching experience. The examiner held a PhD in critical and cultural theory and had published widely on different aspects of literary theory. All the interviews were conducted in a one-to-one manner and the interview with the examiner was complemented by written responses to some of the questions.

The purpose of the survey was to gauge students' attitudes and practices in relation to poetry writing while the interviews sought to provide a richer understanding of the interviewees' beliefs about the topic.

POETRY WRITING HABITS

As shown above, teachers who write poetry find it easier to facilitate poetry writing practices in class. Only one of the interviewed teachers in this study described himself as a creative writer (Teacher E, henceforth TE), having published a number of poetry collections. Two teachers claimed that they had never written any poetry, with one of them exclaiming "writing no!" (TF). She also admitted that, "when I was young I did try once" (TF). This teacher explained that currently she even found it hard to read poetry for pleasure, because of the fact that when teaching poetry she was constantly analysing it. The other five teachers declared that they had some experience of writing poetry. They indicated that they either did it "ages ago" (TC) or else they did it occasionally or "just once every two or three years" (TD). One teacher stated that he "used to write but nowadays I don't have time" (TB) while his colleague confessed that "no one has seen my poetry. I think it's something so intimate that I haven't shown it, except for probably my wife" (TG). Another teacher twice declared, "I'm not a poet though I have written a few things" (TD). One teacher remarked that writing poetry "gives you a tremendous thrill while you're doing it...it's a need...it's the overflowing of the cup" (TA). However, he admitted that he had never sought to publish any of his poetry.

The impression given by almost all of these teachers was that poetry writing for them was something they dabbled in every once in a while without ever really taking it seriously. They were concerned primarily with analysing poetry and writing about it in a critical fashion rather than pursuing it for creative purposes. Some of them felt uncomfortable about any creativity they might engage in in the privacy of their home and this probably hindered them from sharing their poetry with students.

Around two thirds of surveyed students claimed that they did not enjoy writing poetry. This finding was corroborated by two of the interviewed students, who declared that they had never written any poetry, either "because I'm not interested in it" (Student M, henceforth SM) or "because I'm still learning how to really appreciate it" (SO). The latter student also pointed out that she was afraid she would "find it hard" (SO), this probably indicating dread in the face of something she was never encouraged to do at school. Another four students said that their sole experience of poetry writing was when they were very young. One of them stopped writing poetry because she found it difficult to "get the muse" (SN) while another interviewee asserted that "it's just not really my thing" (SA). These results seem to underline the need for poetry lessons that do not just aim to provide students with an understanding of how to write about poetry for examination purposes but also show students that poetry writing can be an enjoyable and useful activity that each one of them is capable of.

The remaining nine interviewed students still wrote poetry sometimes, most of them indicating that they did so because they enjoyed it. Five students remarked that poetry was a means of self-expression: "I write poetry just to express something that I

couldn't express in writing prose...I write when I can't have any other alternative, when the feelings are just for poetry" (SD). According to one student "poetry is such a stress relief... there are certain things that as an individual I don't like to talk about... that's when I write poetry" (SE). Six students affirmed that there were other advantages to writing poetry, such as improving one's writing skills: "obviously it helped me with writing in general so I still do it sometimes when I'm inspired" (SB). This was probably due to their awareness of poetry's creative use of language: "when I actually write it I think of a way in which I could sound more beautiful, more metaphoric, original or artistic" (SF). This was so important for one particular student that he admitted, "sometimes I get a bit...frustrated that I can't get what I want to say into a good poem" (SK). Despite the fact that the majority of students who took part in this study did not write poetry, it is reassuring to see that those who actually did engage in it seemed convinced of its benefits.

IMPEDING ACCESS TO POETRY WRITING

The idea that poetry writing should form part of the A-Level English curriculum was opposed by six of the interviewed teachers, either because of their awareness of time constraints or else because "it cannot be taught or much less examined" (TC). As demonstrated by the literature, one of the most commonly held beliefs about poetry writing is the Romantic notion that poets are special creatures who possess an inherent gift that cannot be nurtured by any other means. This idea was referred to by a number of teachers in this study. In fact, half of them claimed that it would be useless to teach poetry writing: "I don't think we're here to produce poets...assuming that a poet is born not made it would be a huge waste of time barking up wrong trees" (TA). According to one teacher, "if you don't have it in the first place it's...useless" (TC) and he went on to admit, "I don't expect the majority to have it" (TC). In his opinion, "the idea of examining students on their ability to write poetry is totally erratic, mistaken" (TC). Another teacher stated that "it might be unfair at this stage to assess students on their poetry writing because I believe that not everyone is born a poet" (TD).

For these teachers poetry writing was either a talent that one possessed from birth or else an activity that one casually engages in and is quite self-conscious about. The emphasis they placed on the finished poem and its expected artistic merits dissuaded them from seeing poetry writing as something that can be assessed. However, the fact that it is not an assessable subject meant that they also refrained from inviting students to relish the act of writing poetry in class. This acts as a reminder of Morgan's (1996) idea that when encouraging students to write poetry as part of the curriculum, teachers' attention should be "shifted...from the product – the acceptable poem – to the process – the enjoyment of a new way of writing" (p. 53). The belief that if one writes a poem and wants to share it with one's peers it should be of an equal calibre to the poems that students study during their course seemed to hinder these teachers from seeing poetry writing as worthy of a place on the curriculum.

The teachers' objections to poetry writing as part of the A-Level English course were shared by more than half the surveyed students. Around 56% indicated that they were against the idea of writing poetry in class. Two of the interviewed students confirmed this view, one of them asserting that it would not "be fair because...the writing of

poetry requires a separate talent and some people possess it and some people don't" (SA). According to the other student, poetry writing "would make things even worse...I'm already not interested in studying poetry let alone writing my own" (SM). Here it became apparent that some of the students who disagreed with the inclusion of poetry writing in the A Level English course shared their teachers' belief that poetry is a talent one is born with. The rejection of poetry writing was also probably symptomatic of students' perception of poetry as an academic genre that they were compelled to study for examination purposes (Xerri, 2013).

Despite agreeing in principle with the idea of engaging students in poetry writing activities as part of the curriculum, the examiner expressed himself rather cautiously about the conditions that would make such a situation possible. He stated that poetry writing should feature in class only if its teaching "contracts itself to being excellent". In his opinion this "requires the confidence and reassurance of knowing that the people standing in front of students are ready, qualified, disposed, trained to teach like that." He would also "need the reassurance that those same people can respond well to poetry, whatever that means and however you want to gauge that." The examiner considered it "very worrying...that there aren't as many area-specific opportunities for teacher training that would help us to be more reasonably reassured." He claimed not to be convinced that current teacher training programmes were providing trainees with "recurrently reinvigorated means to get teachers up to speed with current thinking in terms of teaching poetry", thus leading to "undertrained" teachers who might lack the "curiosity" to enhance their knowledge and skills in relation to poetry and its teaching.

According to the examiner, in the A-Level poetry classroom "we want a specialist kind of teacher for whom all of this is viscerally important." In relation to poetry teachers' CPD, he affirmed that "where we're very poor is providing teachers in the schools if they have that curiosity with a means of developing." The examiner's emphasis on the significance of training opportunities for poetry teachers was also echoed by two of the interviewed teachers, one of whom declared that she "would find it hard to teach it" (TF) while the other maintained that "you have to be a writer first" (TH). It is possible that teachers' resistance to poetry writing in class could be due to their awareness of a gap in their professional training. Hence, they might feel that the teaching of poetry writing is not part of their specialisation and is best left in the hands of poets. However, as the examiner pointed out, residencies do not currently take place in post-16 institutions (like the one forming part of this study) and this meant that A-Level English students were not even offered the opportunity of occasionally participating in a poetry writing workshop led by a published poet as happens in the UK and some other countries. This made the need for adequate training even more pressing – training that would help provide poetry teachers with the necessary skills, knowledge and confidence to engage students in poetry writing activities as an intrinsic part of the curriculum.

POETRY WRITING'S POTENTIAL

The literature on poetry writing confirms that practising such an activity as part of the curriculum enables students to benefit in a number of ways, many of which are directly relevant to the curricular and assessment targets of the A-Level English

course in Malta. However, in this study only one teacher was in full agreement with the idea that students should be encouraged to write poetry as part of their course, saying that, “it would contribute by way of having the students empathise with the act of writing itself” (TE). In his opinion poetry writing “helps students to empathise with the poem itself... it’s all about reading the work from the inside. I think a creative component would allow students to do that” (TE). He explained this idea by means of the metaphor of looking at stained glass windows from inside a cathedral:

I sometimes tell my students that if you’re in a cathedral and you walk around it and you see the stained glass, those nuances of shape and colour, you can appreciate that whole experience. If you go outside the church and look again at the stained glass windows you’ll see nothing. (TE)

For TE, poetry writing was an act of “empathy” that bolstered students’ ability to critically read poetry, understand how professional poets compose poems, and experience first hand the linguistic creativity involved in writing poems. It also allowed them to take pleasure in becoming fully aware of poetry’s aesthetic qualities. Perhaps it is not accidental that such ideas were expressed by the only teacher in this study who also wrote poetry on a regular basis. This seems to corroborate the notion that if teachers are confident enough to practise poetry writing and share their work with students they are more prone to value the place of such an activity in the curriculum.

Despite the fact that the majority of students who took part in this study were sceptical about the place of poetry writing in the curriculum, 13 of the interviewed students welcomed the idea, seeing it as a profitable activity in terms of its potential to help them better understand poetry and improve their writing skills. They seemed aware of the fact that “in the English syllabus there is no creative writing and maybe there’s more of the analysis aspect” (SB). They implied that even though they were quite different activities “you can incorporate the two” (SI). One student explained the difference between the two by means of an analogy: “you can analyse a painting and its details and understand what techniques he used and how he has used them to bring out an effect but it’s not going to make you know how to paint...you have to try it” (SK). Poetry writing provides hands-on experience of how poems are constructed and this not only enhances students’ writing skills but also their ability to critically read poetry. According to one student, poetry writing would help because you’re applying everything you’ve learnt in crit and poetry...and you can see first hand how a poet applies emotions into their writing...so it would help even to write an essay and to analyse unseen poems because you’d understand firsthand how the poet would write it. (SL)

Another student maintained that “even for students who aren’t really into poetry it makes them appreciate...the actual thought process that it takes to write a poem” (SF). Poetry writing would give students an insight into “what goes on in a poet’s mind in terms of how to use language and structure a poem” and from that they “would get an idea of how poetry is written and even how to read it better” (SO). Two of them were afraid “it would be a bit hard” (SD). However, they felt “it would be fun” (SO). One student stated that “maybe when you have not poets but teachers who are encouraging you it’s better” (SD). For these students, poetry writing was a beneficial activity because it had the potential to enhance their ability to read and

write about poetry in a critical manner as well as help them enjoy their poetry lessons even more, especially if teachers positioned themselves as fellow-writers rather than as gatekeepers to poetry's meaning (Xerri, 2013).

The idea that poetry writing is beneficial for students was also expressed by a teacher who, despite considering it unsuitable for assessment, felt that "it's something which can be very valuable because in trying to write poetry you're coming face to face with what poetry is" (TD). Likewise, for the examiner, poetry writing "should not be up for assessment". Two of the interviewed students agreed with this sentiment and implied that poetry writing should only be done in class because it is an activity that "an examiner can't really assess" (SE). As already indicated above, the misconception that poetry is a special genre that is impossible to assess has contributed to its exclusion from the curriculum, in spite of the awareness that it might enable the development of students' literary and linguistic skills.

CONCLUSION

Teachers can instigate a high level of engagement with poetry by encouraging students to practise poetry writing in class. In fact, the poet laureate Carol Ann Duffy (as cited in Moorhead, 2011) admits that she fell in love with poetry after being inspired by her teachers to start writing. This is partly the reason for which in the UK universities have welcomed the new Creative Writing A Level; the earlier students develop an understanding of the link between critical reading and creative practice the better it is for everyone involved (Cowan, 2013). When teaching creative writing, "Part of the teacher's role is to invite learners to own language and make it useful to them, not just see it as something to be learnt from the page" (James, 2005, p. 45).

Focusing on a post-16 institution in Malta, this article has shown that some teachers and students subscribe to the proposal that poetry writing possesses the potential to develop students' ability to engage in critical reading and help them gain other advantages. Nonetheless, there is also scepticism of the suggestion that poetry can actually be composed inside the classroom and that such writing can be assessed. Teachers' and students' views in relation to what should feature in the poetry curriculum and what should be excluded from it are inspired by similar beliefs. Resistance to the inclusion of poetry writing is spurred by their idea that creative writing is a result of inherent qualities that cannot be cultivated at school. In contrast, the examiner's views on the issue are informed by an awareness that teacher education programmes at both pre-service and in-service level are already inadequate when it comes to training teachers how to teach poetry, let alone in enabling them to encourage students to write poetry. This article has sought to demonstrate that in order for A-Level English students to benefit from creative writing and in the process maximise their enjoyment of poetry, teachers' knowledge, skills and attitudes need to be targeted by appropriate training which will hopefully allow them to act as a catalyst for an embrace of poetry writing on the part of their students.

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